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ABSTRACT

This report examines five dimensions of various initiatives intended to empower students. It is based on two case studies of schools belonging to the Coalition of Essential Schools, a school-reform project aimed at improving teaching and learning in American schools. The report focuses on the level of power that administrators and teachers considered shifting to students at these two schools. It looks at the processes by which the schools empowered students by creating formal structures that would elicit critical student input. The paper discusses whether a shared definition of empowerment was ever sought or achieved and makes the claim that "student empowerment" is an imprecise term. Continuing in this vein of the nature of empowerment, the report discusses how students responded to proposed changes and how they, rather than being passive receptors, were active participants in interactions with teachers. Finally, the paper considers the larger question of what type of power legitimately belongs to students in the empowerment process. The schools under study never resolved the question of appropriate student power and never included students in these discussions. The report cautions that as long as empowerment is bestowed by the powerful on the less powerful, certain problems will arise. (RJM)

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Empowering Nonentities: Students in Educational Reform.

Donna E. Muncey
Patrick J. McQuillan

April 1991

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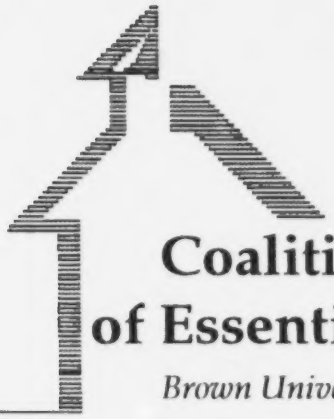

Coalition of Essential Schools

Brown University

Empowering Nonentities

Students in Educational Reform

DONNA E. MUNCEY
and
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THE SCHOOL ETHNOGRAPHY PROJECT (No. 5)

EA 033 535

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The following individuals made helpful comments on earlier drafts of this working paper: Emily Mathis, Martha Gardner, Ingrid Liiv, Sarah Uhl, Elaine D. Gustafson, Amy Gerstein, and Phil Stone. Finally, we thank the members of the Coalition Central Staff and, particularly, Ted Sizer for their willingness to allow us to conduct a long-term study of the Coalition.

ABOUT THE SCHOOL ETHNOGRAPHY PROJECT

The School Ethnography Project was a six-year, independent study *of* the Coalition of Essential Schools, not *by* it. The ethnographers secured their own funding, set their own priorities, and selected their own sites. The project was not intended to evaluate the Coalition of Essential Schools; rather, the intent was to document broadly what occurred in schools as a consequence of the Coalition's reform efforts. Beginning in the fall of 1986, the researchers examined a sample of eight "charter members" of the Coalition and the professional development activities offered by the Coalition's Central Staff for member (and potential member) schools. Most of the research was conducted in the eight study-site schools and focused on two broad questions about the Coalition's Common Principles: How are the Common Principles interpreted by individual schools? And, how do those involved in Essential schools (teachers, administrators, and students) implement the principles as they are developed in each setting?

A shorter and preliminary version of this paper was presented at a session on "Critical Ethnography" at the Ethnography in Education Research Forum, Philadelphia, PA, February 1988.

April 1991

The Issue of Student Empowerment

The Oxford English Dictionary (O.E.D.) defines *empower* as:

> (1) To invest legally or formally with power or authority; to authorize, license. (2) To impart or bestow power to an end or for a purpose; to enable, permit. (3) To bestow power upon; make powerful.[1]

In examining two schools' explicit efforts to empower students, we found that administrators and teachers operated as if they took these conceptions of empowerment literally. They seemed to assume that granting power inevitably leads to sharing power and to view empowerment as a one-way process initiated by those with power and done to those without.

We found the empowerment process to be more problematic than a literal interpretation of the *O.E.D.* definition might suggest. We argue that these definitions are overly simplistic and misleading and that school personnel operating in terms of the assumptions embodied in these definitions can undermine efforts to create and negotiate student empowerment. Specifically, we contend that the schools in our case studies encountered problems with the empowerment process because they tended to 1) view empowerment as a straightforward, one-way process *initiated by* faculty and administration and *done to* students; 2) assume a shared definition of empowerment and to employ the concept without clearly defining its parameters; 3) define empowerment in their own terms without any student input; and 4) promote student empowerment at their own initiative and convenience and with limited preliminary planning.

Much recent research in education has shown that teachers have been both de-skilled and unempowered as schools have become more and more bureaucratized.[2] Moreover, students have long been viewed as passive recipients of information in schools, not as active participants in a school community.[3] Through more recent efforts to empower teachers (such as school-based management and teacher-leader projects), teachers are being given more of a voice in the school community. The rhetoric of the Coalition of Essential Schools (and other reform efforts) suggests that students, too, should be given more of a voice in their schools. Even though less research about students exists, our ongoing work suggests that students are nonentities in many school contexts, although the institution is (ostensibly) designed to serve them and to attend to their needs.

THE GIFT OF POWER

At our study schools, the issue of student empowerment was complicated because for many school people, the term is an oxymoron. It is not that teachers and administrators deliberately deny students power; often they simply do not appear to think about it one way or the other. The faculty and administration in our case studies approached the issue of student empowerment with considerable optimism; yet many revealing forces — from mistrust of student motivations to a preoccupation with order and control to a general disregard for student opinion — restricted the degree of innovation and student involvement.

Because the sharing or transfer of power came from administrators and teachers and was bestowed upon students, without necessarily any involvement by them in the process, we will examine these instances of student empowerment as if they were gifts, following Mauss[4] and, more recently, Larson.[5] As Mauss points out in his classic work *The Gift:*

> The bond that the gift creates between the donor and the recipient is . . . strong. . . . The recipient is in a state of dependence upon the donor. . . . The gift is thus something that must be given, that must be received and that is, at the same time, dangerous to accept. The gift itself constitutes an irrevocable link.[6]

Larson, too, suggests that gift-giving can be a useful way to think about why people have mixed reactions to efforts to empower them. Writing about workers' reactions to participatory management structures, she discusses efforts to create shared decision making:

> Many workers have learned "their place" in organizations. Consultants often find that workers believe management is making an effort to do something for them that it does not

have to do. This thinking reflects their internalization of the dominant management ideology that assumes managers make decisions and workers carry them out. Any change from this ideology is unexpected and, therefore, often perceived as a gift. *It is difficult for people to critically examine the value of a gift.* . . . [I]f people are operating from within the dominant ideology of management, their expectations are constrained by the values of that ideology. Workers' expectations for inclusion in management decision making are so low that they are easily impressed with minimal participation in decisions and have limited expectations of true participation in an emergent participative management ideology.[7] (emphasis added)

In the cases we present in this paper, students can be viewed as the recipients of the gift of empowerment. Their reactions are somewhat similar to those described by Larson; that is, they had limited expectations that they would be true participants in the decision-making process, but they differed from workers by being less impressed with the minimal participation in decision making that they experienced. Instead, as illustrated in the cases, students expressed deep suspicions about and distrust of the empowerment they were being offered. We argue that as long as empowerment is bestowed by the powerful on the less powerful, the dangers and cautions that Mauss presents will be relevant, the reactions that Larson describes and that we also document will be present, and empowerment will be difficult to achieve.

OUR STUDY OF STUDENT EMPOWERMENT

Given our criticism of the assumptions embodied in the *O.E.D.* definition and the unspoken assumptions held by teachers and administrators regarding student empowerment, we address the issue of student empowerment by asking: Is empowerment a process someone can do to another? Can anyone empower an unwilling or disinterested other (in this case, students)? And ultimately, whose definition of empowerment prevails?

Focus of the Study

To investigate these questions, we examine five dimensions of the empowerment efforts that we observed.

First, we consider what power administrators and teachers considered shifting to students. Although in both case studies, neither faculty nor administration were explicit about the power being transferred to students, issues of power were implicit in their interactions.

Second, we look at the processes by which the two schools in our case studies attempted to empower students — both of which focused on creating formal structures to elicit critical student input.

Third, we examine whether a shared definition of empowerment was ever sought or achieved. We are not the first to consider the significance of such a concern. Edward Sapir, for instance, began his classic essay on culture by raising this very issue:

> There are certain terms that have a peculiar property. Ostensibly, they mark off specific concepts, concepts that lay claim to a rigorously objective validity. In practice, they label vague terrains of thought that shift or narrow or widen with the point of view of who so makes use of them.[8]

We argue that *student empowerment* is a term many believe has a "rigorously objective validity." Yet, we have found this term actually "label[s] vague terrains of thought that shift or narrow or widen as the point of view of who so makes use of them."[9] Beyond examining whether students, teachers, and administrators shared a definition of empowerment, we consider a related question: Do all these parties view the process(es) as empowering students?

Fourth, and tied to this third issue, we discuss how students responded to these proposed changes. Rather than assuming that students are passive receptors of these reforms, substantial research indicates that students are "active participants in the dynamic interaction which [makes] any one class [and we might add "and any one school"] what it [is] on any given day."[10] In this regard, we incorporated into our case studies both formal and informal student responses to change — the formal is represented by student responses in the structured, institutional arrangements created to elicit their input; the informal refers to the more spontaneous, unofficial student reactions to change.

Finally, we consider the place of such larger questions as, What power legitimately belongs to students in the empowerment process? Although

faculties discussed this topic, neither school ever resolved the question of appropriate student power and neither school ever included students in these discussions.

Context of the Study

Both case studies for this article were conducted at schools belonging to the Coalition of Essential Schools, an ambitious school reform project aimed at improving teaching and learning in American schools. Begun in 1984, the Coalition includes schools representing a cross-section of American education — the membership includes public, private, parochial, urban, suburban, and rural schools. Unlike many reform efforts, the Coalition emphatically rejects the notion of centralized and standardized solutions to school problems. Instead, it celebrates the diversity of its member schools and stresses that it is a grassroots movement. Consistent with this grassroots orientation, the nine Common Principles that form the basis of this reform are ambiguous by design; each member school is to interpret and act upon the principles within its own cultural and institutional context. Nonetheless, the Coalition does espouse a single overarching goal: "to help students learn to use their minds well."[11]

One common interpretation of Coalition philosophy is that students should be empowered to take responsibility for their own learning.[12] In Coalition rhetoric and writings, empowerment is presented as a desirable end, one closely linked with the goal of creating internally consistent and effective schools and thinking, probing, analytical students.[13] In *Horace's Compromise*, his popular critique of American secondary education that provided the impetus for creating the Coalition, Theodore R. Sizer observed:

> Adolescents have far more power than they display, or are asked to or are expected to display, in most schools. We assume they will be truant, late, irresponsible — and that prophecy is self-fulfilling. We assume they cannot figure things out for themselves, so we tell them things. Paradoxically, we are conspirators, often with them, in their dependence. Happy dependence is a pleasant state for many adolescents. If little is asked of them, their risk of failure is likewise small. . . .
>
> No one is flattered more than when his help is solicited. People, adolescents included, respond to challenge, and they feel personal esteem when their power is recognized and sought. A school which assumes that students will respond to challenge, rather than shrink from it, will be effective.[14]

Similarly, Grant Wiggins, one of the Coalition's first staff members, observed that "[s]tudents should have a major role in the on-going evaluation of current Coalition experiments."[15]

As yet, the Coalition Central Staff has not provided a comprehensive or definitive statement about what constitutes empowerment. This is not surprising. Although the term has become popular, empowerment is not a central tenet of Coalition philosophy (the previous citations of Sizer and Wiggins notwithstanding).

Furthermore, because of the Coalition's emphasis on local interpretation, member schools are encouraged to interpret the Common Principles within their own community context and with their own student body and faculty in mind. The Coalition, therefore, self-consciously avoids making broad interpretive pronouncements on *any aspect* of the Common Principles. Nonetheless, aspects of student and teacher empowerment are implied in Coalition philosophy, as students assume a greater role in determining the course of their education (see note 15) and faculty begin to make decisions previously delegated to others (e.g., budgetary allocations, policy development, and curriculum design).

Although our analysis has critical implications for the two schools in our case studies, we emphasize that these were two of the few schools we have visited (Coalition members or otherwise) that have even *begun* to confront the issue of student empowerment. For most schools, student empowerment is not a priority. Issues of student rights and equal educational opportunity may have concerned American educators and jurists since the initiation of student activism movements in the 1960s,[16] but recent Supreme Court rulings — from permitting searches of student lockers without a warrant to awarding administrators the ultimate power to censor school newspapers — underscore the paternalistic attitude toward students characteristic of American schooling.[17] It is within this context that we examine these efforts at student empowerment.

The data used to prepare this paper derive from ethnographic research conducted between 1986 and

1990 among the Coalition's Central Staff and a sample of early member schools. Research in our sample schools involved both observation and interviewing. We attended classes, school assemblies, planning-period meetings (a set time for teachers to meet to discuss students and their programs — an innovation common to Coalition schools), and extracurricular school events.

As these case studies of student empowerment demonstrate, our presence in several schools (as well as our work with the Central Staff) allowed us to see parallel processes in different schools attempting to create significant structural and behavioral change in accord with the Coalition's Common Principles. The two case studies that follow explore student empowerment with regard to two issues — the bell system and a grading policy — at different Coalition schools.[18] We first present each of the cases and then discuss their relationships to the issues raised above.

CASE I:

A Timely Issue: Student-Faculty Government and the Bells

Barrett Preparatory School, one of the first schools to join the Coalition of Essential Schools, is a private, K–12 school with an enrollment of approximately 250 students located in a major suburb of a large eastern U.S. city. Since joining the Coalition, Barrett has undertaken several restructuring and reform activities. This case study examines one such effort, the General Assembly, a student-faculty governance organization intended to promote greater student involvement in the decision-making process at the school.

A student executive committee, elected by the entire upper-school student body, along with their faculty advisor direct the General Assembly. Once a week students in grades 9–12 and all available faculty and administrative staff meet for the "general meeting," a forty-minute session devoted to discussing issues deemed of interest to all parties. The agenda for the meeting is determined by the executive committee, which consists of the officers-at-large, student members, and a faculty advisor. Anyone can raise an issue during the "new business" portion of the meeting. The headmaster receives a copy of the agenda and often meets with the Assembly's president prior to the meeting. Although administration and faculty attend these meetings, their votes hold no additional weight. They participate as "regular" members, waiting for the chair, a student, to recognize them before offering opinions. The headmaster, however, reserves the right to veto any decision made by the Assembly. Should he choose to veto a decision, his veto is final: it cannot be overridden.[19]

A typical General Assembly meeting is run in accordance with Robert's Rules of Order and the chair conducts the meeting using modified parliamentary procedures. The meeting is structured as follows: after students and faculty have filed in and found seats, the chair calls the meeting to order. Normally, several calls for order are made before the room quiets enough to conduct business. Announcements are the first order of business. Faculty, administration, and students use this time to note upcoming events, to request volunteers for various projects, and in general to keep each other informed about events happening at the school. As Barrett has no daily bulletin or intercom system, announcements are often lengthy and dominated by faculty and administrative notices (such as upcoming exams, deadlines for trips, etc.). After completing the announcements, "old business" is taken up. If the discussion of old business is concluded, new business is considered. Meetings adjourn roughly at the end of the period.

THE DEBATE ON BELLS

Early in the fall of 1987, one of the first issues considered was a motion to discuss recent changes in the bell system. Previously, bells had rung to signal the beginning and end of each class. Over the summer the administration decided to abolish the use of bells. In part, this decision reflected feelings by some faculty and administrators that bells were inappropriate and disruptive. They believed students could be responsible for managing their own time and getting from class to class promptly. They also hoped that removing the bells might create a more "relaxing" atmosphere, since the bells could be quite "jarring" and their absence would avoid a "crunch time" of student congestion in the halls by staggering class dismissals. Finally, for the double-period seminars (a major component to Barrett's pedagogical and structural reform), the administration thought each teacher should determine when to take a break rather than having bells dictate the flow of class time.

In the course of the meeting, students, however, voiced concerns about the lack of bells. They felt they were being held responsible for being tardy when it was not their fault. They complained that many rooms lacked clocks or had unsynchronized clocks so dismissals were poorly coordinated. Both students and faculty expressed concern about the "orderliness" of the school without the bells and indicated that the length of time students were taking to pass between classes had expanded from the previous three-to-five minutes to almost fifteen minutes because of confusion about who was dismissed and where people should be. Occasionally, the students and teachers who were scheduled to use a classroom would arrive before the previous class had been dismissed, creating

additional confusion. Some teachers and students felt the confusion was genuine; others felt students were exploiting the ambiguity of the present "bell-less" situation to socialize longer with friends and avoid class. Some faculty claimed that the lack of bells and lengthened passing time created disruptions that hampered their efforts to begin class on time.

There are two points worth noting about the debate at this meeting. First, the faculty was split on this issue. The previous school year the idea was proposed at a faculty meeting but was rejected by a faculty vote. Many faculty resented the headmaster's decision and felt he was using the General Assembly to insure the elimination of the bells and to disregard the faculty vote. Also, they had discussed the bells informally as well as at a faculty meeting early that fall. Some were more vocal than many students about wanting the bells returned. The various faculty views were aired at the General Assembly, interspersed with student views. The forum thus provided an opportunity for students and faculty to listen and react to one another's opinions and concerns.

The second point is that there was no dominant student opinion on the issue. Students adamantly disagreed about whether they felt more or less responsible and respectful under the new system. Both sides presented reasons for why its view represented the more responsible and respectful position. Those in favor of reinstituting the bells argued that, under the bell system, they were only responsible for themselves. Without bells, they became responsible for reminding teachers to dismiss them so as to avoid being tardy to their next class. In fact, they even contended that not having bells interfered with their education because they now paid more attention to the clock than they had when they could rely on the bell.

Students opposed to the bell system maintained that the atmosphere was more relaxed without bells. Their absence made classroom behavior more respectful because people did not cut short a teacher or student speaking by jumping up as the bell rang. And they added that they felt more in control of their day without the bells and that they expected students would become more responsible about getting to class on time if the administration just gave the bell-less day more time.

As the discussion continued at the meeting, a consensus began emerge among General Assembly members that the bells were important and that their absence created an ever-escalating series of negative consequences. Strong pro-bell arguments were made by several students and faculty members. The anti-bell position became increasingly linked to the administration, with students arguing that they had not been given a choice about whether to have bells or what a bell schedule, if reinstituted, might look like (that is, should bells ring each period or just at key points during the day?). Debate over the bell issue, often heated, was reframed now as an issue of whether students had the related power to determine the bell schedule. Many differing opinions were offered. The meeting adjourned without closure.

Debate continued at the next meeting. Several students and the headmaster proposed options for the reinstatement of the bells. Discussion was again lengthy and punctuated by intermittent applause as proponents of the various motions stated their cases. Eventually one option, presented by a student, appeared most agreeable to all. The options officially on the floor — an initial motion and an amendment by the headmaster — were withdrawn and the student offered his motion: the first three or four weeks of school (which had already passed) would serve as a bell-less experiment; beginning the next week, the bells would be reinstated completely for a two-to-three-week trial period; then, the General Assembly would vote to determine which system they preferred. The motion passed and the meeting adjourned.

Reaction to the return of the bells was uniformly negative. Not long into the experimental period, most students realized they preferred being bell-less. When the two-week trial period with bells ended, the issue was brought up for reconsideration, and the General Assembly voted overwhelmingly to remove the bells.[20] Since then, the bells have been turned off.

AMBIGUITITES OF EMPOWERMENT

In terms of the dimensions outlined in the introduction, this case highlights some of the ambiguities associated with student empowerment. The bell issue represented one of the first substantive issues tackled by the fledgling General Assembly. It was a topic that divided the entire school — faculty, students, and administration. The power being shared involved resolving a situation in

which there was substantial disagreement about what was best for all concerned.

Since attendance at the General Assembly was mandatory, all parties (students, faculty, and administration) were present for discussion; but, of course, active participation could not be forced. In the bells debate, many students actively participated. Many offered no opinion publicly but expressed strong feelings in interviews or informally in other settings. Still others expressed a total lack of interest in the issue. For example, in a "focus group" interview with members of the junior class during the fall of 1987, all the students present agreed that they preferred not having bells. One student summed up the dominant position: "At first I wanted my bells back, but now that they are here, I don't want bells." In a focus group interview with sophomores, they dismissed the topic without comment, preferring to discuss school spirit and the strengths and weaknesses of the current academic schedule and teaching approach.

Beyond the specific issue of the bells, not all students viewed the General Assembly as empowering. In group interviews by grade level, several students claimed that the only ones who benefited from the General Assembly were the teachers and administrators who used Assembly time to make announcements and a few seniors who controlled the student executive committee. One student suggested that faculty and administrators wanted the General Assembly because it would be an impressive public relations item. As he put it,

> I think they wanted to have it so at meetings with other high schools they could say, "Well, in [General] Assembly we have parliamentary procedure and it's really working well, and the students get everything done that they want and we have bright, bright students." I think that was the bottom line.

Another student said,

> I think [the headmaster] decided to take away the bells so we would have a topic in General Assembly. . . . Just to have something to talk about; just to see what we would do with it.

Despite such common negative and somewhat cynical perceptions, students were virtually unanimous in praising the General Assembly's accomplishments during the 1987–88 school year — first, because the Assembly elected a leader who kept meetings on task and, second, because it addressed issues of more general interest than it had the previous year. As a consequence of this student ambivalence, it was unclear whether students saw the General Assembly as a source of empowerment.

For teachers, the General Assembly, by providing a forum to negotiate issues of governance, appears to have been conceived as a way to prepare themselves and their students for a restructuring — or at least a renegotiating — of decision-making power at Barrett. The faculty's reaction to this formal mechanism suggests that they saw it as a viable means for addressing issues of governance, and, implicitly, student empowerment. Their concern that the students would be "used" by administrators to override or undermine faculty decisions suggested that they viewed some power as shifting — in this case, away from them.

Finally, in the headmaster's view, the General Assembly represented one of many "teaching" strategies designed to help students learn to address difficult questions and make thoughtful decisions, in this case questions and decisions related to the entire school community. For him, the Assembly was part of a larger educational process, the goal of which was to help "students learn appropriate habits of mind." To this end it was unnecessary to determine conclusively whether the General Assembly was empowering.

WERE THE STUDENTS EMPOWERED?

Whether the General Assembly was perceived as a forum for students to raise issues, a component of broader educational processes, a means for the headmaster to reopen for further consideration issues the faculty considered resolved, or something else altogether likely influenced the eventual assessment of whether power was genuinely shared or transferred among the parties. Because no one party (student, teacher, or administrator) ever sought to clarify the notion of empowerment, these assessments about the sharing of power varied considerably. Ascertaining whether power was shared or transferred thus was quite problematic.

While the headmaster may have subordinated the empowerment aspect of the Assembly to its educational purposes (since the Assembly needed participation to function), student and faculty views about whether this forum was empowering

were probably relevant in that they affected student and faculty involvement in General Assembly meetings and sponsored activities. And the overwhelming majority of students — in response to a survey conducted in 1989 — said that the General Assembly was not important to them. The most common responses were that it was "a waste of time" and that "nothing ever gets accomplished." In focus groups during the 1987–88 academic year, many students made statements such as this one by a senior: "You can initiate discussion in General Assembly, but I don't think anything's going to be done." Another student commented that "[The Assembly] is boring and stupid and [the headmaster] vetoes most of what we propose to him anyway." One Barrett teacher cynically and privately suggested voting in the permanent return of the bells simply to see whether the headmaster would veto it: "If he thinks something is right, he'll get it one way or another."

This example of Barrett's General Assembly highlights one other major consideration relevant to student empowerment: the significance of ascertaining *whose* definition of empowerment frames the issue. From the headmaster's point of view, it did not matter whether students felt empowered; the educational experience was foremost. The faculty helped create the General Assembly as a mechanism to promote student empowerment, and they brought the bells issue to this forum, but it appears that creating the structure alone was insufficient to engender student empowerment. For students, the divisions among their ranks regarding the value of the Assembly suggested at least that empowerment was not a uniform process; it may not even have been looked upon as desirable by everyone. The second case study, drawn from a different context, illustrates these dimensions of empowerment in similar ways.

CASE II:

Grappling with Grades

Earvin High School is a comprehensive, urban high school located in a northeast city and serving a student population composed primarily of racial and ethnic minorities. At one time, Earvin competed for students with the local "classical" high school, even attracting students from surrounding communities without public high schools because of its reputation. The decade prior to Earvin's involvement with the Coalition, however, it experienced a period of decline characterized by high principal turnover (twelve in thirteen years), building disrepair, rising drop-out rates, and falling attendance rates.

Working together, the local school department, teachers' union, the school faculty and administration, and the Coalition's Central Staff created a school-within-a-school at Earvin by freeing for one semester a team of teachers (four subject teachers and one "head teacher" who administered the program and taught one class) to design their school, using the Coalition's Common Principles as a general guide. To assist the team, the Coalition created the position of "clinical professor." These persons, with specialties in social studies and English, participated in team planning sessions, consulted with teachers on curricular issues, advised student-teachers, and generally did what they could to promote school change at Earvin.

AN INNOVATIVE GRADING POLICY

The "Essential School" created by the Coalition team included a number of differences from the more traditional, larger school. One that proved especially significant concerned the grading policy. Believing that students were often passed on to succeeding grades by compromising teachers who awarded low-Cs and Ds because students were present for most classes and caused no major disruptions, this team sought to create a structure that would encourage student engagement with their school work and promote mastery of their subject materials. To accomplish this goal, the team decided that the Essential School would award only three grades — A, B, and "Incomplete." Students failing to earn a grade of at least 80 on their work received an Incomplete and the work was returned for them to redo. If Incompletes remained at the end of the quarter or if students simply failed to do an assignment, they received an Incomplete for that term, which would remain on their records until all work was satisfactorily completed.

Describing how this grading scheme would promote "mastery," the head teacher explained: "The A-B-I system creates a struggle but, as a consequence, we end up teaching more because we can't give a kid an easy C. It creates a wall we both have to get over." In addition, he felt this system would motivate students to complete work they had missed because "in the past, [making up a missed assignment in order to earn a C at best] wouldn't provide much motivation . . . but now they can work for a decent grade as opposed to busting their butt for only a C." On parents' night, the science teacher explained it this way: "The point is that kids are forced to learn. They can't just say, 'Well, I flunked it.'"

Initially, then, the Essential School faculty saw the A-B-I grading system as a positive change. During the school year, however, the system proved problematic. Many students never made up their Incompletes. Rather than redoing work and earning a higher grade as the faculty expected, many students simply ignored their Incomplete work. Moreover, as the quarters passed, the number of Incompletes mounted. In the first quarter, 74 of the Essential School's 97 students received at least one grade of Incomplete; in the second quarter 68 of 98 did; and, in the third quarter 65 of 104 received at least one Incomplete.

While these figures might be seen as a sign that the Incomplete issue was slowly improving, Incompletes from previous quarters were seldom completed, so the problem was actually worsening. Besides the frustration engendered by this apparent student apathy, the myriad dittos and record-keeping procedures required to coordinate Incomplete make-ups drained faculty energy and time.

In addition, overt student resistance to this grading system began to surface. The prospect of never failing excited some students; but as others

realized that teachers would adhere to the standard of 80-or-better and Incompletes piled up on student report cards, students began to criticize this system. In an interview, one student voiced a sentiment that grew increasingly popular throughout the school year: "Why should I not pass if I have a 70, and 70 is passing in the rest of the school?" In fact, as the number of Incompletes grew with each passing quarter, more and more students maintained that the Essential School should expand the A-B-I system and reinstitute the C.

PROMOTING STUDENT INPUT

As student opposition became increasingly vocal, the Essential School staff began to consider ways they might resolve this problem. Most of the deliberations occurred during the twice-weekly "planning periods," when the entire Essential School faculty, the clinical professors, and student-teachers met to discuss various issues relevant to the program. In these sessions, three interrelated issues often arose: What was to be done about the number of Incompletes? What should be the future of the A-B-I grading system? And, how much say would students have in the program?

Intertwined in these discussions was a faculty sense that student empowerment was an estimable goal that might help them resolve these other concerns. In the first month of school, for instance, the team instituted town meetings, advisory groups, and the Leadership Council — each structure designed, in part, to promote student input in running the Essential School and thereby assumed to promote student empowerment as well. Town meetings involved the entire Essential School population by providing a forum to propose school activities, air student concerns, and recommend policy. In advisory groups, students met with a teacher or clinical professor to discuss matters the Essential School team had identified. The Leadership Council was a student-elected body intended to serve as a liaison between Essential School students and the faculty as well as a forum for proposing social activities.

Prior to the first town meeting, the head teacher discussed a theme that would run through faculty discourse the entire year: how faculty actions could empower students:

> [Town meetings will] allow students to voice general concerns that they have. We'll probably have to be prepared to defend ourselves. We'll let students speak and eventually those with good common sense will speak out and the big mouths won't be the only ones heard. . . . Even if they don't come up with any resolution, [going through the process] will be good. Student councils, to my experience, seldom allow students to talk about things that matter. . . . [But] we want to let kids discuss their program. . . . They can't just *feel* like they're part of this plan, they have to *be* part of it.

Advisory groups were perceived in a similar vein, as offering a means by which faculty "can get feedback from students about various issues." They had a similar view of the Leadership Council. As one teacher commented: "Students will take [our program] more seriously if we do this. I may try to tie the [Leadership Council] in with my social studies class. I want to convey the message that this is important." Yet, by the end of the year, two of these forums would be defunct and the third would face an uncertain future.

This view of empowerment as beneficial, necessary, and desired carried throughout the school year. When considering a proposal by the Leadership Council to gauge whether the Essential School had been adhering to the Coalition's Common Principles, the head teacher told the team:

> I think it's exciting. . . . Students are going to create a dialogue and we'll have to jump into it and defend what we're doing. In a very positive sense, it'll be a means for students to discuss the program. . . . It's beginning to be a group decision-making process.

When discussing the A-B-I issue in March, he again noted the value of student input: "Before we make suggestions, let's decide if it's effective or not. . . . We need feedback from the people it affects most: the students." Even in May, after more than six months of overt student resistance, the team still acknowledged the potential of student involvement. As one teacher commented, "If [students] have power to make decisions that will stick, the kids will do it."

Although the Essential School team supported the notion of student empowerment, they had a sense of the limits to student power. In planning for

a town meeting, one teacher remarked, "We can let kids discuss their concerns, but we have to prepare them psychologically for the fact that some concerns aren't within their power to change." More clearly delineating their official institutional influence, a clinical professor told the Leadership Council,

> It's important that you know the power of the town meeting. . . . You don't have absolute power with regard to changing the lavatory and locker privileges and assessing the program in terms of the Common Principles, but you do with regard to the Halloween party.

When it became evident that the A-B-I grading system was proving difficult, the faculty was at first hesitant to solicit student input. When this grading change became a serious issue in mid-November (the end of the first marking period), it was proposed that the faculty discuss the problem with the students. However, a teacher and a clinical professor both argued that this would "undermine [student] confidence in the program" and that "too many kids [would] manipulate this information to their benefit." In December, with the A-B-I problem still very real, the staff decided to request student input through advisory groups. In so doing, they discovered overwhelming opposition to this policy and substantial support for reinstituting the grade of C. In mid-January, advisory groups again reviewed the grading system and again students expressed disapproval.

By late January, a group of students developed a questionnaire to elicit student feedback on a range of issues relevant to the Essential School, including the grading policy. The head teacher agreed to distribute the questionnaire, but before it was distributed, advisory groups once more discussed the A-B-I issue. Students again voiced displeasure. When the questionnaire results were tabulated, as expected, the grading policy received enormous criticism. (Summarizing student responses, the head teacher said, "The A-B-I system got bombed.") Compared with other categories, the grading policy received the most negative responses and the second-fewest positive comments — just behind "phone calls home for homework and discipline reasons." In mid-April, the grading system was presented to students for discussion for the fourth time, and again teachers and the clinical professors reported significant opposition.

RELATED CONCERNS

Besides concerns with student empowerment and their reactions to the grading policy, the Essential School team struggled with a series of other concerns that emanated from their decision to adhere solely to grades of A, B, and I. For example, in mid-October some teachers admitted to "inflating" student grades so that students would receive at least an 80. As one student-teacher commented:

> I don't have a problem with the C. . . . I feel I may have been inflating grades anyway, especially after students had turned things in five or six times. . . . Looking at these A and B students, I wonder if they are really A and B students.

Earlier in the year, the math teacher had made a similar observation. Although the nature of his discipline prevented straight grade inflation, his compromise entailed "helping" students complete work they had difficulty with so that they could earn the 80.

In a November planning-period meeting, the team identified other problems associated with their grading policy. These included the possibility that students might copy one another's make-up work ("If a student turns in a paper four weeks late, how do you know they didn't copy?") or that it might be unfair for students to earn the same or even better grades on make-up work as those who completed work on time ("I couldn't live with myself. . . . Those taking the test for the third time got the highest grades. If I thought they were really learning it, I wouldn't mind").

As student opposition and logistical problems arising from this controversial grading format built throughout the school year, the C gradually became a part of the Essential School program. In February one teacher suggested that Cs might be more equitable for make-up work; otherwise, teachers might be shortchanging students who completed work on time. In May, the Essential School decided that students withdrawing from the program with course averages in the 70s would receive Cs on their transfer records[21] and that students with grades of Incomplete but averages in the 70s would remain eligible for sports. Within the Essential School, the team's stance shifted to the point where they decided to accept the C for

some classwork, though students still had to maintain an overall average of 80.

In June, the C was officially accepted for all student work. At a key planning-period meeting, numerous arguments favoring the C surfaced. After a year's struggling and reflection, teachers now viewed the C as a "realistic goal" that would "reduce student anxiety." Others mentioned that "some kids work hard and can only get Cs." Furthermore, throughout the second semester, the head teacher lobbied heavily for a decision — any decision — on this issue. He had lived with the controversy and associated administrative headaches all year and was tired of it. From his perspective,

> The grading system isn't an answer. [Rather, it] presents a meaningless obstacle. I see kids [who were] used to doing nothing [now] working their tails off [and] getting Cs, . . . so it doesn't change the learning we want to see take place.

With the school year ending, the head teacher wanted closure on this issue.[22] When pushed to a decision, the teachers voted 6-to-2 to expand the grade range by five points to include the C, from 79 to 75. The vote was taken on June 26, approximately a week and a half after students stopped attending classes.

WERE THE STUDENTS EMPOWERED?

At the end of the June 26 meeting, one team member commented that the vote to include a C

> will show kids that they're being empowered. . . . If we didn't offer the 75, we'd be sending a very negative message to the kids. It would be like saying, "We're asking for your opinion, but we really don't care what it is."

For many students, however, a negative message had already been conveyed. Their feelings had been clear since November, yet they saw little formal action. In addition, students learned of the faculty's decision so late that it seemed inconsequential. As one student asserted in his advisory group the following fall, "When we have these meetings, nothing ever gets done. When we suggest something, nothing happens. . . . We've asked for about 20 things and only got one. That's a bad percentage." Another claimed, "Every time we bring something up at these meetings, it goes in one ear and out the other."

From the head teacher's perspective, three factors prevented the faculty from acting more directly on student objections to the grading system. First, they had no hard data to go on until well into the school year. A large numbers of Incompletes appeared during the first quarter, but given the novelty of this grading approach, the team did not want to abandon their innovation before it was fully tested. Second, they had no precedent on which to base a decision. As the head teacher explained, "It seemed inconsequential to rest our decision [solely] on student objections." Finally, the head teacher feared that acquiescing too quickly to student demands would lead to abuse by students: "Divulging our own questions would . . . [leave] the program open to manipulation."

Still, students may have responded as they did simply because they did not fully understand the situation. An exchange between students and a clinical professor in an advisory group, for example, suggested that some students were not even aware of the connection between the grading policy and intellectual mastery, the central element in the faculty's adherence to the A-B-I policy. After hearing students complain about not having Cs, the clinical professor explained, "From the teachers' point of view, we want to create a school where students master skills." Students reacted quickly: "How will school be good if everyone gets Incompletes?" and "Obviously, it isn't working." The clinical professor responded, "Your teachers are saying that you have to learn [this material]. The idea is that you keep getting chances to learn it rather than saying you failed it. Does that make any sense?" Immediately, a student replied, "No." Another added, "Making us do all this work makes me not want to learn. That's what makes me mad. So I say I'll do nothing." In this instance, at least, empowerment might have been promoted through better communication.

In this case study, as in the first, empowerment involved soliciting student input as the basis for shaping program policy. Although the team created three forums for this purpose among others — town meetings, advisory groups, and the Leadership Council — the parameters of their power and appropriate student roles were never systematically clarified, either for students or faculty. This lack of clarity seems to have influenced how both groups viewed the empowerment

process. What teachers saw as empowering for students (forums the faculty created to allow students to express their opinions), many students viewed as virtually insignificant and/or they had no conception of how or why such a forum should have been empowering. Even the basis for the faculty's adherence to the A-B-I grading system — the desire to promote student mastery of course materials — was not clear to some students.

Moreover, those who initiated the empowerment process (faculty and administrators) seemed ambivalent about what power students should have. At the year's end, teachers emphasized that student input had caused the grading change, but the faculty had at first been hesitant to solicit any student input. Furthermore, although the faculty highlighted the role played by students in enacting this policy change, concerns with grade inflation, record-keeping procedures, and student cheating also influenced the faculty's decision.

Another factor that may have influenced this process was students' responses to the faculty's efforts at empowerment. Some faculty clearly felt that students were manipulating the situation, somehow violating the faculty's trust. Yet, student manipulation was *ad hoc* at best, given that their input was limited and two of their three forums eventually proved to be short-lived. Moreover, since these forums for promoting student empowerment were novel for both students and faculty, it seemed (from an outsider's perspective) that it would take time for students to appreciate the value of these forums as well as to learn how they best functioned.

The Fate of Student Empowerment

In this final section, we will take a look at how the issues presented in the two cases evolved over the next three years and explore some common issues raised by both. We will then present some observations and conclusions about these cases and offer a few suggestions of our own for faculties that want to empower their students.

BELLS AND GRADES: 1987–1990

What happened to the issues of the bells and the grades at the case-study school between 1987 and 1990? The General Assembly continued at Barrett for the remainder of the headmaster's tenure at the school (i.e., until June 1990). During this time, the Assembly was "plagued" by poor leadership and accusations of being a popularity contest, a lack of credibility stemming from the Assembly's raising and passing a series of motions that were then vetoed by the headmaster, and a general apathy and lack of participation leading to a complete restructuring of the use of the General Assembly period by the fall of 1989. On a rotating basis, the weekly time slot was devoted to General Assembly meeting periods, schoolwide assembly periods, and class meetings. Students initiated a self-study of the General Assembly during the 1989–90 school year, and preliminary results of a student opinion survey revealed low levels of support for the Assembly.

With a change of headmasters in the summer of 1990, the General Assembly time slot was eliminated from the 1990–91 school schedule. Interestingly, students were not a part of the decision-making process that led to its elimination; some were told informally of the Assembly's likely demise only in conjunction with preparing a student-initiated survey report about the Assembly. The results of that survey did not inform this decision, since they were not available to the faculty and administration before the decision was made. Most students learned of the change only upon returning to school in September. While few students mourned its loss, it is revealing of the lack of shared/ transferred power that they were not involved in deciding its fate and were relatively unconcerned upon learning of it.

At Earvin, Incompletes remained an issue for the Essential School team through June of 1990. By the end of the 1986–87 school year (discussed in the body of this case study), 76 of the Essential School's 102 students had at least one Incomplete. Thirty-one of these students had Incompletes in all four Essential School subjects.[23] However, the addition of the C the following year did little to alleviate this problem. Over the next two-and-a-half years the Essential School team continued to struggle with this issue before agreeing upon a second and later a third revision to the Incomplete policy.

After the first year that the faculty grappled with the Incomplete issue, students had little say about it. Furthermore, in terms of general student input, two of the structures created to promote student empowerment became defunct that first year. The Leadership Committee initially held regular pre-school meetings, but poor student attendance and general disinterest led to its demise midway through that first school year. Only two town meetings were ever held. Advisory groups are the sole remaining forum for student input, but only about half of the Essential School students have an opportunity to participate in them.[24]

SOME COMMON ISSUES

A number of parallels exist between these two case studies, although the school settings and issues under contention are quite distinct. The clearest parallel concerns structural changes: both schools created one or more forums to give students a voice in school matters. In doing this, school personnel appeared to equate creating a new structure with the realization of empowerment and the transfer of power. Acting in terms of assumptions implicit in the *O.E.D.* definition of *empowerment*, they saw themselves as authorized to endow students with power and viewed these new structures as appropriate vehicles for this transfer. However, there were factors involved in these two case studies (and, we believe, in most American high schools) that made such a straightforward conception of empowerment more problematic.

For one, in both cases there was no administration or faculty consensus on the issues under consideration. The bell system and the grading policy had been ongoing concerns. By entwining concerns with empowerment with efforts to resolve these

issues, the issues were further complicated. Also, neither faculty had much experience in dealing with issues of student empowerment, and the students had had no experience in exercising a voice in school matters.

Moreover, as part of their work with the Coalition of Essential Schools, both schools were engaged in extensive efforts to change traditional practice and to re-examine aspects of the everyday life of their schools — bells, grades, and concepts of responsibility and accountability, for instance. This work already took up much time, effort, and attention. There was never a high priority given to helping students understand and work through the process of empowerment at either school because student empowerment (had it emerged) would have been almost a side effect of the change process more generally. In practice, this meant that there was little, if any, effort to socialize students about the transferring or sharing of power or about problems that might be encountered in the empowerment process.[25] Teachers and administrators seemed to view *their* stamp of approval and *their* attendance at meetings as sufficient engagement in the empowerment process for student empowerment to occur. Reflecting this lack of concern with the process of student empowerment, the head teacher at Earvin commented that although the town meetings might prove a bit disorderly at first, "eventually those with good common sense will speak out and the big-mouths won't be the only ones heard."

The difficulties engendered by these factors — the complexity of the issues being confronted, the inexperience of all parties with student empowerment, and the lack of sustained attention to the process of empowerment — were compounded by two additional factors. First, as evidenced by the accusations of manipulation that abounded, there was a pervasive lack of trust among teachers, students, and administrators. Students at Earvin were accused of manipulating teachers to get by with less work and earn grades they did not deserve. Teachers at Barrett accused the administration of manipulating students to their own ends and negating the limited power faculty felt they had. Furthermore, teachers at Barrett felt that students used the ambiguity created by the lack of bells to socialize longer with friends and come late to class.

Beyond accusations of manipulation, there were also specific actions taken by those in power that further suggested a lack of trust and seemed to impede efforts to empower students at both schools. For example, the absolute veto of the headmaster at Barrett seemed reasonable to some but to others it signaled a lack of confidence in the outcomes empowered students might produce. And, as the head teacher at Earvin remarked when explaining why the faculty had virtually ignored student responses to the program's grading policy for so long: "It seemed inconsequential to base our decision on student objections."

A second factor that further seemed to influence these scenarios was that not only were students new to exercising power, but the teachers as well were new to having and using power. Much of the power teachers of both schools had, they had only recently received themselves (through being selected for the school-within-a-school team at Earvin or in the creation of a faculty review committee at Barrett). In part, the teachers' ambiguous attitude toward student empowerment may have stemmed from their own inexperience with power coupled with an emphasis on classroom control and orderliness within the school as a primary order of business between teachers and students.[26]

OBSERVATIONS AND FINDINGS

In both of our case studies, discussions about the dimensions of student empowerment in the abstract and vis-à-vis the particular issue at hand were never clarified for any party prior to, during, or even after the resolution of the particular issue. Although most of those involved agreed that empowerment was desirable, our observations and interviews revealed that what various participants meant by student empowerment, as well as any concomitant expectations, were never fully clarified. Student input was solicited at both schools with no guarantee that it would be acknowledged or accepted — the Barrett headmaster reserved complete veto power to himself, and the Earvin faculty were ambivalent about whether to solicit student input at all.

As we have seen, students' formal responses to attempts at empowerment ranged from active involvement in discussions about the issues to resistance (assertive questioning as well as more passive nonparticipation) toward the new institutions, teachers, and administrators. In both cases the surveys seemed an appropriate formal response

consistent with actions one might take to ascertain the group's opinion. Informal student responses to change were more skeptical — for example, the Barrett student who wondered if the bell issue was an invention of the headmaster's to give the fledgling organization something to do. Responses to the efforts to empower students, then, led to a variety of other responses — formally and informally expressed — from compliance and participation to skepticism and silent attendance at mandatory meetings.

When students did act in ways that could be perceived as using their "new" power, the faculty and administration reacted to these efforts with ambivalence. At Barrett, during the 1987–88 academic year, students introduced and passed a motion that limited the time allotted for announcements during General Assembly in order that these meetings would not be dominated by faculty announcements. In 1989, the students initiated a survey to assess the status and perceived value of the General Assembly. Earvin students also produced a survey to assess student perceptions of their Essential School program. Yet, these efforts were never encouraged or publicly acknowledged by the faculty or administration, and students were never part of discussions about the implications of these data. Earvin faculty eventually acted on the findings of the student-initiated survey, but it was well after the fact and after students had left for the summer. Along similar lines, Barrett faculty observed the time limitations for announcements for a few weeks, but gradually began to forget or ignore the rule. Further, the General Assembly was abolished before the faculty received any findings from the student-initiated survey. In effect, then, students in both cases were asked to play a game where the rules were never specified and where they might or might not even be allowed onto the field.

Furthermore, students were never a part of any discussions regarding what should or would constitute student empowerment. The concept, therefore, was defined *by* teachers and administrators *for* students. Likewise, interpretations of what constituted empowerment originated with teachers and administrators as well. Thus, what teachers and administrators identified as acts of student empowerment — eliminating the bells at Barrett or adding the C to Earvin's grading scale — seemed less authentically empowering to us as outsiders, since many students viewed their roles in these decisions as insignificant. Since the interpretations of empowerment originated from the teachers and administrators, they may simply represent convenient interpretations.

Based on these two case studies, we have argued that the process of transferring or sharing power that must occur in order for student empowerment to manifest itself is difficult to actualize. By creating forums to solicit student input, faculty and administrators could equate new organizations with student empowerment, while never systematically having to plan or negotiate the conditions of its appearance.[27] While personnel at both schools made some attempts to link notions of student empowerment with existing aspects of schooling that might offer philosophically compatible means to the same end (for example, looking for opportunities to empower students in the classroom or in extracurricular activities), their primary response was to create new forums. As the Lynds observed of Middletown years ago:

> As in so many other aspects of Middletown's life, criticism of individuals or creakings in the [educational] system are met primarily not by changes in its foundation but by adding fresh stories to its superstructure. . . . [Thus,] strains or maladjustments in education are being met by further elaboration and standardization.[28]

Another finding evident from our research is that *all* sides manipulated whatever power was available to them in what they perceived to be their best interests. In these cases, however, one side — the students — began with and always had less power to manipulate. Moreover, inexperience with the more overt negotiation and manipulation of power in formal contexts by students and teachers in both school settings hindered their ability to use, develop, and assert their *new* power effectively when they were given some.[29]

Given is the operative word here. Teachers (and to a lesser extent students) are now being given power (or, following Larson, what may be the illusion of power) in much the same way that gifts in general are bestowed — with the façade of voluntary transfer and the reality of incurred obligation. As Mauss writes:

> To give is to show one's superiority, to show that one is something more and higher, that

> one is *magister*. To accept without returning or repaying more is to face subordination, to become a client and subservient, to become *minister*. (italics in the original)[30]

In other words, as we have seen in our case studies, if student empowerment is given to students by those seen as their superiors, the power allegedly transferred or shared may actually remain intact in the original structural arrangements and/or the new structural arrangements may replicate the existing structure, hierarchy, and ideology, rather than serve as a harbinger of new power relations among those involved. Our case studies show that distrust (on all sides) and continued denial or ignoring of the students' perspectives made the question of whether there was any transfer of power problematic. Further, for our purposes, Mauss's book and Larson's recent article raise the question of whether there can be genuine empowerment at all. If empowerment is the transfer of power by someone to someone else, might it not inherently recreate the problematic nature of all gift-giving?

STUDENT EMPOWERMENT AND SCHOOL REFORM

In view of our work and with a careful reading of Mauss and Larson in mind, we suggest that the emphasis on "giving" power (or voices) to teachers and students may explain some of the difficulties that current reforms are facing. The giving of power to others brings the unequal power relations between the parties into focus by making the everyday workings of the school community visible and increasingly problematic, without necessarily changing or even addressing their ideological underpinnings. In the long run this may create change, but in the short run it seems to increase distrust.[31]

Because distrust seems common in situations of unequal power, the previous point suggests an additional question: Can someone become empowered by others for whom there is strong distrust? Our evidence suggests that empowerment will not occur if all parties do not believe that the transfer of power is genuine rather than a provisional gift. As we saw in both our cases, this condition was not met, and distrust impeded the sharing of power. At Earvin, there was such a lack of clarity on the part of all parties about the dimensions of power that, in retrospect, students may have been smart to be skeptical. Opinions were sought, forums created, and then pronouncements and qualifications that sounded suspiciously like backpedaling began. "You can decide about a dance; otherwise, you have little power" was one message. "We don't trust that you will not abuse the system, so we want to make it harder to do that" was another. At Barrett there was a clearer sense of what power students had — they could make any decision they wanted — but everyone knew that any decisions could be overruled by the headmaster. This could be viewed as having substantial power or none at all.

Aside from the implications regarding the difficulty of sharing and transferring power, acknowledging the problematic nature of this process has another important consequence: it highlights the importance of understanding the actions and reactions to proposed and enacted changes by *all* participants in school reform. Student reactions are particularly important in this case for two reasons. First, as the Coalition's avowed purpose is "to help students learn to use their minds well," student perspectives become central to understanding both the processes and outcomes experienced as changes are enacted. Second, the emphasis on student empowerment in Coalition writing and in member schools implies that student voices on school issues are relevant and should be heard.

Furthermore, it is important to document how students "test" their power, since this may affect their receptivity to and participation in the formulation of additional reform. Finally, though the weight given these voices may vary from school to school, the Coalition's use of empowerment strengthens our contention that analysis of reform focused on teaching and learning must include student perspectives, even if the formulation and enactment of reform do not.

The genuine or spurious argument about student empowerment could begin with one question: What power legitimately belongs to students? Neither school in our case studies had (to our knowledge) discussed this issue at any point in their efforts to empower students. Such a discussion might clarify what is expected of *all* parties and thereby reduce levels of mistrust.[32] It might also offer schools an opportunity to explore how they might incorporate student empowerment into existing structures rather than making it another addition to the "shopping mall high school."[33]

Many schools have included new attempts at shared governance in their restructuring efforts or other reform strategies. This paper has focused on two such efforts in order to define student empowerment, to illuminate the issues raised by efforts to promote student empowerment, and to consider the question of whether it is attainable. A parallel investigation of efforts to create teacher empowerment from the perspective of how shared meanings are created, negotiated, and used in practice could be an important addition to understanding how people share, transfer, or receive power — if in fact they do.[34]

NOTES

1. *Oxford English Dictionary*, eds. J. A. Simpson and E. S. Weiner (2nd ed., 1989).

2. Linda McNeil, *Contradictions of Control* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986); and Michael Apple, *Education and Power* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982).

3. John Goodlad, *A Place Called School* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1984); Theodore Sizer, *Horace's Compromise* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984); and Coalition of Essential Schools *Prospectus* (Providence, RI: CES, Brown University, 1985).

4. Marcel Mauss, *The Gift*, trans. Ian Cunnison (New York: W. W. Norton, 1967 [1925]).

5. Colleen L. Larson, "Transforming Management Philosophy: Beyond the Illusion of Change," in *Organizations in Transition: Opportunities and Challenges for Evaluation*, eds. Colleen L. Larson and Hallie Preskill (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991): 73–86.

6. Mauss, 58.

7. Larson, 81.

8. Edward Sapir, "Culture, Genuine and Spurious," in *The Selected Writings of Edward Sapir in Language, Culture, and Personality*, ed. David G. Mandelbaum (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963 [1949]):308.

9. Ibid. See also Hervé Varenne, *American School Language: Culturally Patterned Conflicts in a Suburban High School* (New York: Irvington, 1983).

10. Robert Everhart, *Reading, Writing, and Resistance* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983): 197. See also Stanley Aronowitz, *Education Under Siege* (Boston: Bergin and Garvey, 1985); Philip Cusick, *The Egalitarian Ideal in the American High School* (New York: Longman, 1983); Philip Cusick, *Inside High School: The Student's World* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973); and Willard Waller, *The Sociology of Teaching* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1932).

11. Coalition of Essential Schools.

12. Grant Wiggins et al., "Student as Worker" Unpublished manuscript for use at conferences and workshops (Providence, RI: Brown University, Coalition of Essential Schools), n.d.

13. Although the two schools in this case study interpreted *empowerment* in terms of governance structures, this is not the only source of student empowerment discussed in Coalition rhetoric. The Coalition also talks about empowerment that emerges from changes in the classroom. For example, contrary to what many contend is the normal, passive attitude taken by students toward school work (e.g., Goodlad [n. 3]; Sizer [n. 3]; and Ernest Boyer, *High School: A Report on Secondary Education in America* [New York: Harper and Row, 1983]), the Coalition maintains that students must be active workers in the classroom. Concomitantly, as students adopt a new classroom role, so must teachers. Rather than rely on lecturing, teachers need to conceive of themselves as "coaches," helping students to develop the essential skills and intellectual habits integral to using one's mind well. Enacting these philosophical tenets of "student-as-worker" and "teacher-as-coach" is often seen as resulting in a sharing or transfer of power within the classroom. For example, students may assume responsibility for teaching the class, selecting their own assignments, or editing the work of other students.

14. Sizer, 65–66.

15. Grant Wiggins, "Eleven Suggestions for Reform that Are Radical — But Shouldn't Be," *Horace* 3:6 (1987).

16. David P. Ericson and Frederick S. Ellet, Jr., "Taking Student Responsibility Seriously," *Educational Researcher* 19:9 (December 1990): 3–10.

17. It is not only in the school setting where students have little significant responsibility and/or power. Marion Lundy Dobbert et al. in their article on cross-cultural analysis of cultural transmission ("Cultural Transmissions in Three Societies: Testing a Systems-Based Field Guide," *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 15:4 [1984]) observed that American children

> although valued, are often excluded [from adult activities and responsibilities]. They are put to bed; they are placed in front of the TV; they are not encouraged to join adult work or conversation with nonfamily members. Our protocols show a great number of these child-excluding situations for children . . . who, in other societies, especially at the higher age levels, are often regarded as valuable aides. (pp. 302–303)

Also, Beatrice and John W. M. Whiting revealed a similar trend in their book *Children of Six Cultures. A Pyscho-Cultural Analysis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975). In their cross-cultural assessment, they found that children in "complex" societies, as compared with those in "simpler" societies, were not responsible for many "important economic and domestic tasks" and, when they did become involved, they did so at a later age (p. 94). Consequently, children from "complex" cultures tended to be more dependent and less responsible, than children brought up in "simpler" cultures (pp. 128–29). Ironically, a key factor that restricted children's involvement in such activities as well as the degree of responsibility they held was their need to attend school (p. 101).

18. The efforts of faculty and administration in Coalition member schools to work within the ideological framework of the Common Principles appear to be an effort to create a widespread cultural consensus. See James Fernandez, "Symbolic Consensus in a Fang Reformative Cult," *American Anthropologist* 67 (1965): 902–27.

19. On one occasion where he considered vetoing a resolution passed by the General Assembly, the headmaster discussed the possibility with members of his administrative committee at a separate meeting after the Assembly passed the resolution.

20. Faculty and students voted. Since there was no count, it is not clear whether faculty votes changed or not, while it was clearly evident that many students' votes changed.

21. Though this policy was formulated, it was only necessary for three or four students.

22. In many respects, this final planning period differed from most meetings held during the school year. Specifically, no clinical professors were present; one team member was absent; and this was the first meeting attended by members of the Essential School team to be added the coming school year. This seemed to increase the likelihood of resolving the A-B-I issue for two reasons: first, opposition was less likely to arise since three members of the present team were

absent, two of whom were consistent proponents of the A-B-I policy; and second, the new team was relatively unfamiliar with the issue and thus, one could argue, less likely to challenge the head teacher's wishes.

23. We make this distinction since Essential School students also take classes in the larger school (e.g., gym and electives such as foreign language and computers).

24. Between 1986 and 1990, the Essential School expanded to include four separate teams. After the first year of the program, the Essential School faculty decided that each team would determine whether to have advisory groups. Presently, only two teams have chosen to have advisory groups and, as in the past, they meet irregularly.

25. This point is especially important because, as numerous researchers have observed, in attempting to use power students can actually work against their long-term interests. As Judith Friedman Hansen observed in *Sociocultural Perspectives on Human Learning. Foundations of Educational Anthropology* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1979): "In many classrooms, student-teacher transactions can be understood as processes of political conflict in which students win the battle and lose the war." See also, Paul Willis, *Learning to Labour* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977); Reba Page, "Lower-Track Classes at a College Preparatory High School: A Caricature of Educational Encounters" in *Interpretive Ethnography of Education at Home and Abroad* eds. G. Spindler and L. Spindler (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1987); Ray McDermott, "Achieving School Failure: An Anthropological Approach to Illiteracy and Social Stratification," in *Education and Cultural Process, Anthropological Approaches* eds. G. Spindler and L. Spindler (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, Inc., 1987); and John Ogbu, "Variability in Minority School Performance: A Problem in Search of an Explanation," *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 18 (4: 1987).

26. One Coalition principal suggested that effective teacher empowerment might stimulate student empowerment since teachers offer powerful role models for their students. See Philip Cusick, *The Egalitarian Idea in the American High School*, and Mary Metz, *Classrooms and Corridors: The Crisis of Authority in Desegregated Secondary Schools* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

27. George D. Spindler and Louise Spindler, "Roger Harker and Schonhausen: From Familiar to Strange and Back Again" in *Doing the Ethnography of Schooling* ed. G. D. Spindler (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1982). The Spindlers discussed a similar phenomenon and called it a substitutive change, i.e. a change which appears to be revolutionary but in fact does little to alter the existing relationships and/or situation. They contrast this type of change with a change in principle which is a significant change in how people interact or how resources are dispersed, for example.

28. Robert Lynd and Helen Merrel Lynd, *Middletown* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, Inc., 1929). Jules Henry in *Culture Against Man* (New York: Random House, 1963) made a similar connection between what happens in American schools and what occurs in society at-large: "American classrooms, like classrooms everywhere, express the values, preoccupations and fears found in the culture as a whole " (p. 287). And as we have found, power relations issues in schools mirror those in the larger society as well. Recently, Larson (1991) has suggested that creating new structures in business can create an illusion that change is occurring while actually impeding active consideration of why so little is changing.

29. The negotiation and manipulation of power, through such mediating concepts as those suggested below, has been an important focus of anthropological and sociological attention for the past thirty years: reputation: F. G. Bailey, *Gifts and Poison: The Politics of Reputation* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971); J. B. Haviland, *Gossip, Reputation, and Knowledge in Zincantan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977); honor and shame: David Gilmore, *Honor and Shame and the Unity of the Mediterranean* (Washington DC: American Anthropological Association, 1987): 2–21; Michael Herzfeld, "Honor and Shame: Problems in Contemporary Analysis of Moral Systems," *Man* 15 (1980): 339–351; J. G. Peristiany, ed., *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966); Unni Wikan, "Shame and Honour: A Contestable Pair," *Man* 19 (1984): 635–652); gossip: M. Gluckman,

"Gossip and Scandal," *Current Anthropology* 4 (1963): 307–316; Sally Engle Merry, "Rethinking Gossip and Scandal," in *Toward a General Theory of Social Control, Vol. 1: Fundamentals* (New York: Academic Press, 1984): 271–302; Robert Paine, "What Is Gossip About? An Alternative Hypothesis," *Man* 2 [1967]: 278–308, and Robert Paine, "Gossip and Transaction," *Man* 3 [1968]: 305–308); class and status: James Fernandez, "Consciousness and Class in Southern Spain," *American Ethnologist* 10 (1: 1983): 165–173, Wikan, 1984; Donna E. Muncey, "Social Differentiation, Reputation, and Return Migration in Eastern Andalucia: A Case Study from Eastern Jaen," (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Brown University, Department of Anthropology: 1990).

The British school has made more of an effort to incorporate interactionist and negotiation strategies into educational anthropological research, for example: Martyn Hammersley, "On Interactionist Empiricism," in *Pupil Strategies*, ed. Peter Woods (London: Croom Helm Ltd., 1980): 198–213; Andy Hargreaves, "Synthesis and the Study of Strategies: A Project for the Sociological Imagination," in *Pupil Strategies*, ed. Peter Woods: 162–197; Peter Woods, "Negotiating the Demands of Schoolwork," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 3 (1978): 309–329; Peter Woods, *The Divided School* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979); Peter Woods ed., *Teacher Strategies* (London: Croom Helm Ltd., 1979); and Peter Woods ed., *Pupil Strategies*. Our research findings suggest this emphasis is a natural and underutilized one in studies of school change. Power is contested in every domain of a school community undergoing change — including not only the power to determine what terms mean, but also the power to establish the standards of evaluation for enacted changes and the power to determine when "full implementation" has been achieved. We are currently preparing a book about the Coalition of Essential Schools that traces some of these negotiations and their outcomes during five years of its growth and expansion.

30. Mauss, 72.

31. In addition it often alienates participants who feel overburdened by their present situation and intimidated by the ever-increasing magnitude of the tasks at hand.

32. Scholars studying social change and applied anthropology (for instance, Roger Bastide, *Applied Anthropology*, trans. Alice B. Morton [New York: Harper and Row, 1971]; Elizabeth M. Eddy and William L. Partridge, *Applied Anthropology in America* [Boston: Bergin and Garvey Publishers, Inc., 1978]; Louise Spindler, *Culture Change and Modernization. Mini-models and Case Studies* [New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977]; and George Foster, *Applied Anthropology* [Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1969) have long advocated including the intended recipients in the formulation of change and discussions about it.

Thus far, the Coalition, too, seems to have limited the inclusion of these intended recipients of change. For instance, they have two publications, *Horace*, an informational newsletter on the Coalition of Essential Schools, and *The Conversation*, a joint publication with the Education Commission of the States (ECS). Of the twenty-seven issues (twenty-one *Horaces* and six *Conversations*) published between March 1985, and June 1990, teachers have authored seven articles; school administrators, nine articles; Coalition or ECS staff fifty-four articles; and professional journalists, three articles. Students have authored two articles. And even though a recent issue of *Horace* focused on "What Students Say About Essential Schools," there was no discussion of student governance or formal mechanisms for soliciting student perspectives.

Student attendance at Coalition-sponsored events has also been proportionately low. At the first National Fall Forum (1989), no students from member or interested schools were present. At the second Fall Forum, out of a total of approximatately 850 attendees and conference presenters, 20 were secondary students. Other conferences exhibit the same tendency toward low numbers of student participants.

33. Arthur G. Powell, Eleanor Farrar, and David K. Cohen, *The Shopping Mall High School: Winners and Losers in the Educational Marketplace* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1985).

34. These three options focus on a sharing or transfer model. Another possibility exists. The intended recipients of power, in this case the students, might simply seize power and define it themselves. Although that did not happen in either of these cases, it should be viewed as a possible scenario.

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